

“Elected”

Rev. Debra Given, the Presbyterian Church in Leonia
May 17, 2015 Easter 7B

Psalm 1 Acts 1:12-17, 21-26

Are you tired of hearing about who's running for president in 2016? We still have a year and a half to go, so I try not to pay too much attention. But it's hard to avoid the constant reports about who is doing what and what everybody thinks about it. Anyone who wishes to be President of the United States of America spends at least a year or two raising money, currying favor, polishing their image and promoting themselves, all the while being picked apart and scrutinized from all sides, in a glorified popularity contest. Is there a better way to choose a leader?

In the early church, the first leaders were hand-picked by Jesus. He saw who he wanted and he called them, twelve men, to follow him and be his disciples. But after Jesus was crucified and rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, they needed one more disciple because Judas had betrayed Jesus and dropped out of the picture. Not that they had to have twelve leaders, but the disciples may have believed they needed twelve to represent the twelve tribes of Israel, as they prepared for God's coming kingdom. So in the book of Acts that Takeshi read from this morning, while the whole group was praying together, Peter stood up and called for a replacement. And Matthias was chosen by lot. No fund-raising. No glossy resumes, campaign mailings or debates. No surveys to see who was most popular.

Casting lots to choose a leader may seem random or superstitious to us today. But there were some conditions. They were looking for someone who had been following Jesus from the beginning. The person would have to have been an eyewitness, and experienced everything, not just the highpoints and miracles, but all of Jesus' comings and goings over the last three years. And there may have been more than two people who fit that qualification, including some women, out of the 120 people gathered that day. But somehow they narrowed it down to two for the final draw.

When you think about it, many positions are filled by lottery even today. The jury selection process begins with a lottery. Some public schools admit students based on a lottery. Green cards are awarded by lottery. Whenever there are more people qualified than there are slots available, a lottery system is probably the most fair way to choose. It's actually more democratic than an election, because everyone has an equal chance of being chosen, regardless of their power or wealth, or the bias of those choosing. Should we use a lottery system to choose our pastors, deacons and elders from among qualified candidates? How would you feel if someone put your name in such a lottery? What if you were chosen that way? Would you feel called by God?

In the Bible, leadership was never based on a person's accomplishments or resume or popularity. God calls whoever will do what God wants. And sometimes the most unlikely people are chosen.

For example: Judas. Jesus called Judas to follow him as part of the original twelve disciples, as Takeshi read Peter's words from Acts this morning, "...for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry." Judas was called by God and had a part to play, a share in the ministry. He held the money purse (John

13:29), so he could be called the treasurer of the group. That was an important role. Judas was part of the inner circle, the group that worked most closely with Jesus. But not all calls work out. Judas ended up conspiring with the chief priests, who were looking for a chance to arrest and kill Jesus. They offered Judas money, and when the opportunity came, Judas led them to Jesus, so they could arrest him.

Why would someone who was part of Jesus' inner circle do something like that? And did Jesus know Judas would betray him when he called him? It wasn't obvious to the other disciples that Judas was drifting from his call. When Jesus told the disciples that one of them would betray him, it says they asked each other which one of them it could be who would do this (Lk. 22:23). They didn't automatically think of Judas. Each was afraid it might be himself (Matt. 26:22).

Some people say Jesus called Judas because it was part of a predetermined plan for Judas to betray him. Jesus had to be killed to fulfill God's will, and therefore God needed Judas to betray Jesus. But I don't believe God works that way. People are not simply pawns who fulfill a script where everything has been decided in advance. God gives us free will, and the decisions we make and the actions we take make a difference. Jesus may have known that someone would eventually betray him. But he may not have known who it would be when he called his disciples.

The point is, Jesus calls people, and each call is worthwhile while it lasts, even if the call doesn't work out in the end. We are all God has to work with, and whatever we contribute counts. Judas was numbered among the disciples and he had a share in Jesus' ministry. He did a terrible thing. But the other disciples weren't perfect either. Remember how Jesus had to rebuke Peter, saying to him, "Get behind me, Satan?" when Peter tried to convince Jesus he wouldn't have to suffer. Peter also fell asleep in the Garden after Jesus had begged them to stay awake. And he denied Jesus three times, after pledging vehemently that he would never desert him.

Both Peter and Judas were sinners. The difference was that Peter's sins were out in the open. He never tried to keep them secret. Judas, on the other hand, didn't know, or confess, or repent, until after the damage was done. And then it was too late. Peter made lots of mistakes and committed sins. But he was able to admit his wrong, repent and receive forgiveness. And that's all God asks of us. None of us are really worthy enough to serve or to lead others. But God can use us to do great things when we are honest and open about who we are.

Now the story of Matthias' call is not exactly the most famous or inspiring story in the Bible. In fact, many people wouldn't even list it as a call from God. When you think of God calling people, who do you think of? Maybe Moses and the burning bush, or the boy Samuel who heard a voice calling in the night, or Mary's visit from an angel, or Paul falling to the ground in a flash of blinding light. We may even think of Jesus' call at his baptism, with the heavens opening and voice coming through.

Matthias didn't get a dramatic display of flashing lights or a booming voice. Instead he got a meeting... of human beings. How boring. But that's probably more like our own experience than not. People today sometimes do hear a voice, or have a vision. But most of us are called through more ordinary means.

Many of you were chosen for leadership because someone told you they thought you'd be good at it. You didn't volunteer. You just planned to be an anonymous part of the group, looking for some inspiration as you tried to make sense of your life. But

before you managed to get it together, someone invited you to serve on a committee, or to serve as a deacon or elder. Sometimes, before we've found the space in our lives to volunteer, we're drafted. Our lot comes up, and we take our turn at leadership. People don't always realize how much they are needed, or they lack the confidence to think that God might use them. They need to hear the voice of the church in order to hear and respond to God's call.

But just because someone thinks he or she is called to do something, doesn't always mean it's true. Most of us need to test our call in a community. That's why in the Presbyterian system, we never ordain someone to be a pastor, until they find a place where they can serve. You may think God has called you to be a pastor, but if no one wants you to be their pastor, or there's nothing out there for you to do, maybe God has something else in mind.

I worked in a church once with an elder who was always getting big ideas of what the church should be and do. We should expand this program, rent this space at a higher rate, try this or that. At one point he even started a campaign to tear the church building down, in order to make more money. But few of his ideas were ever met with enthusiasm from anyone else in the congregation. It took us a while to figure out that most of these schemes didn't come from the spirit, but from this man's own need to feel important. Just because someone volunteers, does not mean that God has called them.

Matthias didn't volunteer, as far as we know. But he was called through the voice of the community, with the help of the lottery. Some people say that, since we never hear about him again, it must have been a mistake to choose him, and that Paul should have been the twelfth disciple. After all, Paul was a great thinker who traveled all over the known world, and wrote letters that are now the foundation of Christian theology. But do you have to make headlines in order to have a legitimate call? The point is not to call attention to ourselves, or be remembered 2,000 years later. The point is to witness to Jesus Christ, to pass on the good news of the gospel to the next generation, and to build up the community of faith.

And God needs all kinds of people to do that. Everyone who calls him- or herself a Christian has a role to play in passing on the message. You don't need to wait for a voice from heaven to start studying the Bible, and learn the story of Jesus' life, so you know what you're talking about. You don't have to wait for the appearance of an angel to share your faith with your family, or invite a neighbor to church. You don't need to wait for a flash of blinding light to sign up to teach Sunday School, or visit the sick, or take a stand for justice. Maybe God's call comes through the voice of the nominating committee. But it can also come when we notice a need or hear a request, or think a thought. You don't have to polish your image, promote yourself, or wait to be elected. God calls all of us to do our part. So may we serve with energy, intelligence, imagination and love, to the glory of God. Amen.

